



Women in Trades: Plumbing

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Leslie Cotton, UA Local 290 apprentice and Oregon Tradeswomen pre-apprenticeship graduate

Every week, Secretary Marty Walsh travels around the country to meet workers where they are and discuss how the Department of Labor can empower them. Leslie Cotton met Secretary Walsh during his trip to Oregon. We caught up with Leslie and asked her to share her experience as a woman in the plumbing trade.

Tell us about yourself. How did you choose this field of work?

I live with my elderly dad and help take care of my disabled brother. There came a clear point that I needed to find a good career that provided better wages, good health benefits, and something I could retire on (without going into debt to get to it.) So, I started researching trades and was really drawn to piping.

What is your favorite part of the job?

I get to do something different every day! I'm always learning something new. There's problem-solving, physical activity, communication and ingenuity. I'm never bored.

What resources – job trainings, career development, etc. – did you use?

During all my trades researching, I found Oregon Tradeswomen. I applied for their free 8-week pre-apprenticeship class and was fortunate enough to get in pretty quickly. I kept my full-time job as a customer service phone rep through it all! The timing for me getting into the trades was also very fortunate, as some of the local unions started accepting graduates of state-approved pre-apprenticeships directly into their training programs. I graduated from OTW and had orientation with the United Association the very next day.

We don't see many women in your field. What do you think are a few barriers to entry?

I think in general, the trades have not been presented in school as a valid path to a long, well-paying career. Particularly to folks coming from poverty who can't afford university debt. Also, our society sometimes has a tendency to paint certain careers and activities as "male" or "female," such as doctor vs. nurse, or plumber vs. teacher. As such, a lot of women didn't grow up playing with tools and building things, so there's a bit of apprehension. (That's what makes the pre-apprenticeships so great, it helps level the playing field.) But, there aren't just barriers to entering, but also to staying in the trade. Especially early on. There can be barriers with transportation, finding child care for long hours, having the funds for good boots and workwear, etc.

What would you say to a woman who wants to join your industry but is hesitant?

Track down a pre-apprenticeship or tradeswomen group in your area. Start talking to folks and building connections. Having that support system will be huge in your apprenticeship. Never be afraid to ask questions. Learning measurements and how to use tools is just a matter of practice, and you will get plenty!

Tags: plumbing, apprenticeship, Women's Bureau, Oregon Tradeswomen

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